

An Original Approach to the Teaching of Songs in the Classroom

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The purpose of this article is to show how songs can be used successfully for teaching English. Songs are invaluable aids in developing students' listening skills, and there are many advantages to using them in the classroom: they are easily available (you only have to go out and buy them); they present new vocabulary and expressions in context; through them students become familiar with the pronunciation of native speakers; they provide topics for discussion; and finally, most students enjoy listening to and analyzing songs, since they provide a break from the textbook and workbook routine.

The main difficulty in using songs as teaching aids lies in choosing the most suitable ones among the maze of those available. I will describe in detail some specific criteria for choosing songs, and then focus on ways in which a song might be taught.

Choosing a Song

I favor the use of rock songs in class, because in today's society rock music is everywhere. It is constantly played on the radio, on TV, in downtown stores, in restaurants, in supermarkets, and in night clubs. Such widespread exposure has made it a big part of our lives. Rock music is roughly 40 years old; in that short timespan it has invaded almost every corner of the world, exposing millions of people to Western culture and values. Its impact on our lives cannot be denied. To quote Paul McCartney, rock music is the classical music of the twentieth century.

Students enjoy learning English through songs. As they learn the lyrics to songs they have been listening to for years, they are often surprised to discover their meaning. This is how a good song can prompt discussion in class.

What to look for. The teacher must choose carefully the song to be presented. The suitability of a song depends on how well it fulfills the purpose of teaching new material. The lyrics should be easily discernible, each word must be clearly pronounced, the vocabulary must be rich and varied, and the song must carry some sort of message, or at the very least, tell an interesting story. The ideal song for teaching is one written primarily for the lyrics to be listened to, as opposed to songs featuring a lot of drum work and loud guitars, intended primarily to be danced to.

As a rule, solo artists are easier to understand than most bands, because bands often feature a chorus of voices on top of the lead singer's voice. Sometimes the chorus echoes the words of the lead singer; other times the lyrics sung by each may be completely different, which results in two parallel songs that complement each other. The effect is often rich and interesting, but it may create some confusion in the student's mind when he or she tries to separate one set of lyrics

from the other. This is not to say, however, that all solo artists are good candidates for the listening-comprehension exercise.

What to avoid. I would suggest that teachers steer clear of the following types of songs:

- songs that are too fast-paced
- songs in which the music buries the singer's voice
- songs in which there is no substance to the lyrics
- songs that verge on the obscene or that include lyrics that are discriminatory (for instance, songs that mock religious beliefs)

After these types of songs have been discarded, much is left that is valuable and will appeal to the students. If the teacher chooses wisely among the huge number of songs available, he or she will come across quite a number of little treasures.

Subject-matter Categories

Since songs studied in the classroom become the topic of discussion among students, it is important to know what they are about. I classify songs according to their subject matter. There are songs about friendship, growing up, growing old, love of our fellowman, political songs, songs that tell a story of a third party, and songs about the meaning of life. However, the most frequent topic is love. This comes as no surprise. Some rock songs are the modern equivalents of poetry, and what better source of inspiration than love? As the saying goes, love makes the world go 'round.

The truly classical love song focuses on the person who inspires this feeling in the singer. It is devoid of direct allusions to the physical side of love, and is soul-elevating. In this category I include the following:

The Beatles' *Here, There, and Everywhere*
John Lennon's *Woman*
Kenny Rogers's *Lady*
Elton John's *Blue Eyes*
Billy Joel's *Just the Way You Are*
Gordon Lightfoot's *Beautiful*
Billy Ocean's *Suddenly*
The Bee Gees' *Words*
Blood, Sweat, and Tears' *You've Made Me So Very Happy*
Supertramp's *My Kind of Lady*

There are endless variations on the classical love song, depending on the circumstances that determine the kind of love that's being described. There are songs about love with a married man (Whitney Houston's *Saving All My Love for You*, Barbra Streisand's *Coming In and Out of Your Life*); infidelity (Barbra Streisand/Barry Gibbs's *Who's Sorry Now?*); one-night stands (The Beatles' *Norwegian Wood*); women taking the lead in a relationship (The Pointer Sisters' *He's*

So Shy); infatuation (Chris the Burgh's *The Lady in Red*, Smokey Robinson's *Being with You*, The Carpenters' *Close to You*); unrequited love (Don McLean's *Crying*, Frankie Valli's *I Make a Fool of Myself*, Robert Palmer's *I Want You*); and finally, songs about the pain and heartbreak that love invariably means (Phil Collins's *Against All Odds*, Chicago's *If You Leave Me Now*, Neil Diamond's *Love on the Rocks*, Michael Bolton's *How Am I Supposed to Live without You?*).

Aside from love, there's a wide variety of topics in rock songs that can be brought to students for discussion. There's friendship (James Taylor's *You've Got a Friend*); nostalgia (The Beatles' *Yesterday*, Barbra Streisand's *The Way We Were*); self-esteem (Whitney Houston's *The Greatest Love*); the brotherhood of man (John Lennon's *Imagine*). There are songs that tell a complete story (Kenny Rogers's *The Coward of the County* and *The Gambler*), and then there are seemingly "nonsense" songs, such as The Beatles' *Strawberry Fields Forever*, which are really about dreams and insights into the meaning of life occurring during altered states of consciousness (induced by drugs). The "nonsense" songs are amazingly rich in metaphors, and their enigmatic lyrics lend themselves to a variety of interpretations, thus fostering discussion among students.

Two Ways to Teach a Song

One way to teach a song is by first handing out the lyrics, then going through the grammar and syntax, examining the vocabulary used, and finally, trying to analyze the content of the song. When every student has thoroughly grasped the meaning of the lyrics, I play it and have them sing aloud in order to practice their pronunciation.

There is another method, which allows the students to discover some of the lyrics by themselves. This is done by handing out a copy of the song with some words missing. Thus, the listening-comprehension exercise really fits its purpose, since students must listen carefully in order to make out the exact words being sung. I've found that students enjoy this exercise a lot. When they can't figure out what it is that's being said, they generally insist upon listening to the passage again and again until they understand every single word. This "filling in the blanks" exercise has proven to be a great opportunity to teach new words in context, as well as phrasal verbs, idiomatic expressions, and even some familiar or slang words, which I clearly point out should be used with care in everyday conversation.

There is a strategy for the placing of the blanks. Depending on the grammatical content of the song, I will place the gaps where there are either nouns, verbs, adjectives, or adverbs. Thus the students will know specifically what to look for. Some songs lend themselves to this kind of exercise better than others. Because there is often a certain amount of distortion in spelling and grammar, students should be encouraged to look for mistakes and correct them, using good English.

When all the words have been figured out, we look at the song as a whole and try to understand what it's telling us. Is it a love song? What's happening to the main character? What feelings or thoughts are being expressed in the song? We analyze the song as though it were a piece of poetry. Often, we find that songs are just that.

An Example

What follows is a description of how the teacher might want to present a song in class. I chose Supertramp's The Logical Song, which to me is the epitome of the intelligent rock song. It is a little masterpiece about growing up that challenges the Establishment from a philosophical standpoint.

The Logical Song, by Supertramp

When I was (young), it seemed that life was so (wonderful), a miracle, oh it was (beautiful,
magical)
And (all) the birds in the trees, well, they'd be singing so (happily, joyfully, playfully) watching
me.
But then they sent me away to teach me how to be (sensible, logical, responsible, practical)
And they showed me a world where I could be so (dependable, clinical, intellectual, cynical).
There are times when (all) the world's (asleep), the questions run too (deep) for (such) a (simple)
man.
Won't you please, please tell me what we've learned.
I know it sounds (absurd), but please tell me who I am.
I said, watch what you say or they'll be calling you a (radical, liberal, fanatical, criminal).
Won't you sign up (your) name, we'd like to feel you're (acceptable, respectable, presentable), a
vegetable!
There are nights when (all) the world's (asleep), the questions run so (deep) for (such) a (simple)
man.
Won't you please, please tell me what you've learned.
I know it sounds (absurd), but please tell me who I am.

This song features 26 adjectives; naturally, that's where the blanks have been placed. (There are three extra blanks that correspond to adverbs.)

I hand out the lyrics, with the blanks I have created (indicated by the words in parentheses), and the students listen to the song.

This song has not only grammatical interest, but also a profound message that will be the starting point for an interesting debate in class. For instance, students could look at what the song suggests society is turning young people into. They might also talk about the role of education in shaping young minds into conformity. Or they might want to contrast the description of the world seen through a child's eyes with that of the adult world. When it comes to the vocabulary used in this song, again there's a contrast between the happiness of the child and the cynicism of the adult. In addition to discussing the meaning of all the adjectives, the teacher could take this

opportunity to point out the difference between words such as *sensible* and *sensitive*, *dependable* and *dependent* words that are often confused by students.

When a song has been analyzed as thoroughly as this, students will find that they are in a much better position to appreciate it fully. The whole process might take up to one hour. It is common knowledge that students who relax and have fun while learning do learn more. Exploring and discovering the essence of a song adds to students' enjoyment of and interest in the English language.